

Reconnaissance

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Even with the evolution of today's technology and the increasing reliance on joint operations within the U.S. military there is still relevance in the Marine Corps for maintaining its Force Reconnaissance capability. However, there must be a willingness to accept new roles and responsibilities on the part of reconnaissance Marines and traditional infantry commanders at the MEF and Division levels. Force Reconnaissance Commanders must be willing to conduct missions in support of units subordinate to the MEF and be willing to relinquish some operational control over them when necessary. Simultaneously, MAGTF commanders must see a relevant need to employ Force Recon when there are numerous "less risky" options available. The Marine Corps in turn must acquire the aviation platforms necessary to support the mission when called for.

Marine commanders today do not have to rely solely on ground reconnaissance to gather intelligence. They have an array of high tech assets at their disposal. Aerial reconnaissance provides the commander with reliable photos of enemy activities with far less risk than putting Marines on the ground. The F/A-18D has an Advanced Tactical Air Reconnaissance System (ATARS) that was used extensively during OIF to observe the enemy and select targets for future destruction.¹ The AV-8B Harrier has a

¹ Capt David Fairleigh/ USMC, Interview by Siebrand H. Niewenhous, at Expeditionary Warfare School, January 11, 2005.

camera system called "Litening Pod" that can record footage of enemy troop concentrations and provide this as intelligence information to commanders.

However, the Litening Pod was designed primarily as a Strike Coordination and Reconnaissance (SCAR) platform to designate targets for bombing. Many Harrier pilots prefer that it be used solely for this purpose and not as a reconnaissance/intelligence gathering platform.²

Without question the greatest visual reconnaissance tool that has become available to commanders today is the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The UAV provides the commander with a real time visual reconnaissance capability with no risk to U.S. personnel. UAV's such as Pioneer and Predator were used extensively during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Predator has a range of up to 500 nautical miles and can loiter over an area for up to 24 hours sending real-time video images to the MAGTF/Joint Force commander.³ It also can act as a satellite or UHF relay for communicators on the ground.

UAV's were essential to the success of U.S. forces during the ground phase of OIF. A prime example of this was I MEF's use of the Predator to observe the Iraqi 10th Armored Division in

² Capt Andy Devine/ USMC, Interview by Siebrand H. Niewenhous, at Expeditionary Warfare School, January 11, 2005.

³ Unknown Author, "Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)(USA), Posted to Airforce-Technology.com website, date unknown, <http://www.airforce-technology.com/projects/predator/>

eastern Iraq prior to 1st Marine Division's march to Baghdad. Brigadier General Mattis' plan called for the division to make a rapid assault toward Baghdad using Iraq's central road system. The Iraqi 10th Armored Division was positioned in eastern Iraq was poised to assault the Marines' right flank as they pushed north. First Marine Expeditionary Force used UAV's and Force Recon Marines to observe the Iraqies and provide early warning of their movement.

The advancements in UAV and satellite technology raises legitimate questions as to the relevance of human intelligence on tomorrow's battlefield. Why risk a service member's life or a fifty-million dollar aircraft when if you lose a Predator you only lose the vehicle? Tomorrow's commanders will continue to use unmanned intelligence gathering technology to the maximum extent possible.

However, there are limitations to UAV's as there are with other technological systems. UAV's have limited on station time as there is only so much fuel a UAV can carry before it must return to base. UAV's are also noisy if flown at low altitudes and can be shot down with small arms fire. Most importantly, UAV's provide nothing more than a distant picture of a target from high altitude. They cannot substitute for having actual human eyes on the enemy. A human being can more accurately assess the moral of the enemy and the limitations of his

equipment and personnel. This was illustrated in the previous example of the Iraqi 10th Armored Division. Despite having UAV coverage on the Iraqis I MEF Commander Lieutenant General Conway still sent 1st Force Recon Company to visually guard 1st Marine Division's eastern flank.

In the last century there are several examples that prove the relevance of human intelligence. In each case if human intelligence (HUMINT) assets had been employed more effectively the subsequent operations conducted might have been conducted differently. The raid on Son Tay Prison during the Vietnam War, Operation Fortitude prior to the allied landing at Normandy, and Operation Iraqi Freedom are a few of these examples.

At Son Tay if the United States had inserted a recon team to keep an eye on the North Vietnamese prisoner of war (POW) compound from May through July 1970 it would have seen its POW's moved due to heavy flooding in the camp. The U.S. might have adjusted its time table and attacked the new location thus freeing U.S prisoners. Instead, the Pentagon relied largely on SR-71 photographs and missed the movement of the prisoners on 14 July, 1970.

In World War II if the Germans had inserted military reconnaissance teams to observe the allied forces at Pas de Calais and in Norway they might have discovered the papier-mâché aircraft and armor staged to deceive the Germans. They might

have realized they were being tricked and placed more of their combat power on the beaches of Normandy.

Finally, if the United States had been able to rely on its own human intelligence to determine Saddam Hussein's WMD capability we might have altered the time table for our attack on Iraq.

Once a commander has decided to use ground based human intelligence to collect on the enemy he has several options (to include Special Operation Command (SOCOM) forces) to choose from. Unfortunately for the MAGTF Commander the advantage to using SOCOM assets versus organic Force Reconnaissance Marines (particularly in the ground reconnaissance mission) lies in the advanced aviation assets SOCOM possesses.

During OIF 1st Force Recon Company was limited in its ability to perform deep recon inserts due to the lack of capable Marine aviation platforms. 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing was incredibly resistant during OIF to allocate Marine helicopters to fly low-level night inserts behind enemy lines. Their concerns were that CH-46's and CH-53's do not possess the advanced avionics packages necessary to detect and evade Iraqi radar and ground fire. In addition Marine pilots do not train to this mission. To paraphrase an Expeditionary Warfare School classmate, "to us pilots an insert is an insert, we are used to inserting infantry Marines to an LZ and are not used to flying

in low light conditions, in support of "special operations" style inserts."⁴

Marine pilots have a legitimate concern when Marine helicopter platforms are contrasted with SOCOM assets, and Marine pilots are asked to put there aircrews' lives on the line. A CH-46 has a maximum range of 181 miles and is thus ineffective for deep recon inserts.⁵ CH-53E's can travel up to 540 miles but have only their GPS's to guide them.⁶ If their GPS malfunctions the aircrew can become rapidly disoriented, especially in the desert. CH-53E's also posses the largest heat signature of any helicopter in the Marine Corps inventory and have no electronic countermeasures (unlike Ch-46's, Hueys, and Cobras).⁷ As a result, they are an easy target for rocket propelled grenades and missiles.

In order for the CH-53E to perform a deep recon insert it must have Cobra escort to mitigate for its weak defensive capability. This limits the overall range of the mission to 315 miles, the max effective range of the Cobra.⁸ Also, training to perform this type of mission has not been a priority in the

⁴ Capt Corey Dekraai/ USMC, Interview by Siebrand H. Niewenhous, at Expeditionary Warfare School, January 11, 2005.

⁵ Wikipedia Encyclopedia, "Ch-46 Sea Knight", http://wikipedia.org/wiki/CH-46_Sea_Knight

⁶ USMC.mil website, CH-53E, <http://www.hqmc.usmc.mil/> factfile.nsf/0/8a583a9bef2c6f8d852562e0048fsfc?Open Document USMC.mil

⁷ Capt Corey Dekrai/ USMC, Interview by Siebrand H. Niewenhous, at Expeditionary Warfare School, January 11, 2005.

⁸ FAS, Military Analysis Network, "AH-1W Super Cobra, <http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ac/ah-1.htm>

Marine Corps because we have not taken the mission seriously.

Prior to the Corps' recent attempt to integrate into SOCOM the Marine Corps has traditionally been extremely resistant to perform "special operations" style missions.

In contrast to SOCOM's aviation capability, Air Force Special Operations Command's MH-53J Pavequals and MH-60 Pavehawks possess inertial navigation systems, GPS, Doppler projected map displays, Terrain Following/ Terrain Avoidance (TF/ TA) Radar, and FLIR. They also possess armor, medium and heavy machine guns and everything from UHF to satellite communications.⁹ ¹⁰ It is understandable that Marine pilots are reluctant to fly 300-500 nautical miles into the desert using solely GPS.

There is no question that with the Marine Corps' budget and priorities it cannot afford to invest in these systems in large quantities. The Corps is an infantry-centric organization with a long history of performing its mission better than anyone in the world. However, why does the Marine Corps maintain a Force Reconnaissance capability yet does not make the effort to acquire the aviation platforms to support it? We talk about having a complete MAGTF capable of operating as a combined arms team yet we do not take the steps to enhance our deep human intelligence gathering capability. When it comes time to perform

⁹ Global Spec Ops, "MH-53J Pavebow" helicopters, Excerpt from the JCS SOF Reference Manual, <http://globalspecops.com/mh53j.html>

¹⁰ Global Spec Ops, "MH-60 Pavehawk" helicopter, Excerpt from JCS SOF Reference Manual, <http://globalspecops.com/mh60.html>

the deep HUMINT mission we are forced to leave our recon Marines on the sidelines or rely on SOCOM/ ODA (Other Defense Agencies) / OGA (Other Government Agencies) assets. There is no question Force Recon has a role on today's battlefield. We ought to acquire at least the minimal aviation platforms necessary to support the deep recon mission.

Unfortunately the MV-22 will not give us the capability. It does have a comparable range to the CH-53E and a much greater max speed (roughly 240 knots). However, the MV-22 still does not have an advanced avionics package necessary to perform this mission successfully. In contrast the CV-22 the Air Force is buying has all of the same Terrain Avoidance/ Terrain Following (TA/TF) radar and upgraded communications packages that current SOCOM platforms have, with updated systems as well.¹¹

The Air Force is purchasing (50) CV-22 Ospreys for its Special Operations Squadrons. The Marine Corps is purchasing (348) MV-22's to support its infantry and other forces. The Marine Corps should examine whether it can make eight to ten of these helicopters into CV-22's to support its Force Reconnaissance units. A less desirable alternative would be to upgrade a portion of the Marine Corps current inventory of CH-

¹¹ FAS, Military Analysis Network, "V-22 Osprey", last updated May, 13 2003, <http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ac/v-22.htm>

53E's with advanced avionics and self defense capabilities. In either case the requirement for this capability is clear.

In summary, Force Reconnaissance is a valuable asset that will continue to perform a critical function for the MEF/ MAGTF Commander. By making an effort to acquire the aviation platforms necessary to perform the deep reconnaissance mission the Marine Corps will truly be a self sustained MAGTF capable of performing the full range of combat missions in support of its ground combat element. Barring such aviation improvements human intelligence gathering in the deep battle space will be reserved solely for those units with access to Air Force helicopters. Deep ground reconnaissance, the "bread and butter" of Marine Force Recon will be a skill the Marine Corps is incapable of supporting.